



Portraits of Patriotism

Can They Fight?

As the Civil War dragged into its third year, skeptics asked that question about black soldiers. In early 1863, a few short weeks after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, the secretary of war authorized the governor of Massachusetts to raise the first predominantly black Union regiment. The 54th Massachusetts Infantry formed in February outside Boston, filling its ranks with 1,000 volunteers from throughout the United States and Canada.

Some Northerners disparaged the effort, believing that “free blacks” lacked military discipline and would fight badly. Southern reaction was worse. The Confederate Congress proclaimed that black soldiers captured in uniform would be sold into slavery and white officers of such troops would be executed. Hence, the men of the 54th Massachusetts faced the additional challenge of proving not just their worth as fighting men, but also their value to their race and their country.

They proved equal to this task on July 18, 1863, at a Confederate earthwork guarding the harbor of Charleston, S.C. Because of its artillery and narrow approach, Fort Wagner seemed invincible. However, it was a challenge from which the 54th did not recoil. As depicted in this 1890 Kurtz and Allen lithograph, the unit attacked at dusk, encountering heavy shelling. Still, most of the 54th survived to charge onto the fort’s parapets to fight hand to hand. They held their ground for an hour before being pushed back. One wounded soldier, SGT William H. Carney, saved the 54th’s battle flag, an act for which he was ultimately awarded the Medal of Honor. In September, the Confederates abandoned the fort. Despite losing more than half its soldiers, the 54th reconstituted and later distinguished itself at battles in Florida and South Carolina.

The assault on Fort Wagner altered Northern opinion about black soldiers’ capability to fight. The most poignant comment came from Lewis Douglas, son of abolitionist leader Frederick Douglas. A member of the 54th, Lewis wrote: “This regiment has established itself as a fighting regiment ... not a man flinched, though it was a trying time ... I wish we had a hundred thousand colored troops — we would put an end to this war.” — *CPT Patrick Swan*

